

McGill

Sayings of Jesus

1st 1979

University

Lenten Series

organized by

John Hellman, Dept of History, Held in Royal Victoria College Lounge

Many of you are familiar with the old claim that the Bible contains the 'living word'. To a philosopher this claim is intriguing because it implies that some words must be dead and others alive. We know that some words are dead in the sense that they no longer are in use, their meaning is archaic; but what about sentences or phrases in which the words are familiar and commonly used. How might they be dead? Why ~~is~~ ^{is} it that we do not refer to our daily newspaper as containing the 'living' word? I would like to suggest at least one tentative answer to this question. The Bible is experienced time and again as a vehicle for ~~total~~ personal transformation. The ~~words~~ ^{words} it contains ~~within~~ seem to have a power beyond their normal function. They are alive in us at the moment we read them or think about them. ~~and This is the great mystery of it all~~ ^{God a}

My first encounter with this aspect of the living word was in graduate school in California. I had been a confirmed atheist for many years. Circumstances intervened to place before me the Gospel of John. I thought ^{at that time} that whatever I read couldn't hurt me and I approached the gospel with something akin to sarcastic sneering. ~~and~~ Then I read:

In the beginning was the Word
the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came to be,
not one thing had its being but through him.
All that came to be had life in him
and that life was the light of men,
a light that shines in the dark,
a light that darkness could not overpower. 1:1-5

All my tightly reasoned arguments about the impossibility of God's existence began to slide away ^{fading} into the distance. I felt that what I was reading was true ~~was~~ at the moment I

concentrated on

~~read~~ it. I read further:

The Word was the true light
that enlightens all men;
and he was coming into the world.
He was in the world
that had its being through him,

and the world did not know him. 1:9-10

Yes. I did not know this Word. I ~~had~~ ^{however, I felt I wanted to,} ~~wanted to.~~ ^{yet for the first time}
The 'living' word had made its first visit into my life. I remember vividly (and this was over 15 years ago) not being able to put the Gospel of John down until I read to the end. I also

remember

and feeling astonished, sheepish, curious, and bewildered about what ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ was happening. No other words

~~xxxxxxx~~ Since that first experience of the living Jesus that I had read before or after had had this effect on me.

For the purposes of this evening's discussion I would like to divide my encounters with the gospel into three phases of ~~a~~ spiritual journey, although things ^{division} never unfold as simply as this would imply. Also I will limit myself ~~very primarily~~ to the Gospel of John although in my own life the other gospels play equally compelling roles in revelation and the process of personal transformation. The three phases will be first, the encounter with Christ; second, the personal call to follow Christ; and third, the slow and progressive revelation of the nature of this as a ~~xxxxxxxx~~ call specific to my own life circumstances.

The first phase

John the Baptist - "Behold the lamb of God,"

The sayings of Jesus which affected me most at the beginning were those ~~which~~ in which he described himself. They all led to a discovery that this man was God and is God ... a discovery that I ^{found myself compelled} ~~had~~ to embrace. To the woman at the well he said:

If you only knew what God is offering
and who it is that is saying to you:
Give me a drink,

you would have been the one to ask,
and he would have given you the living water.

...

Whoever drinks this water
will get thirsty again;
but anyone who drinks the water that I shall give
will never be thirsty again:
the water that I shall give
will turn into a spring inside him, welling up to
eternal life. //

4:10-14

The living word is also living water.

~~And~~ To a crowd near Capernaum Jesus said:

"I am the living bread which has come down from heaven.
Anyone who eats this bread will live forever;
and the bread that I shall give
is my flesh, for the life of the world."

^{So}
~~And~~ the living water is also living bread.

~~And~~ To the Pharisees he said:

"I am the gate of the sheepfold.

...

I am the gate
I have come so that they may have life
and have it to the full. 10:7-11

The living bread is ^{then} also ^a ~~the~~ gate.

^{Jesus}
~~And he~~ continued speaking to the Pharisees:

"I am the good shepherd:

the good shepherd is one who lays down his life

for his sheep." 10:10-11

^{then}
The gate is also the good shepherd.

~~And~~ To Martha Jesus said:

"I am the resurrection." 11:25-26

The good ^{shepherd who} ~~shepherd~~ lays down his life for his sheep is
himself the resurrection.

I began to see that

death ~~is~~ overcome by the good shepherd; and the resurrection is the truth.

Christ said/ to Pilate:

"I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of the truth listen to my voice." 19:37-8

Finally

~~and~~ ~~again~~ to Thomas he said;

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." 14:6

What Christ said to Thomas, to Pilate, to Martha, to the Pharisees, to the crowd, and to the woman at the well ~~he said to me.~~ ^{seemed to be saying to me.} If ~~his~~ words ~~were~~ ^{were} dead then this would not have been possible. I listened to the words ~~at this point~~ ^{and} and made the decision to become a Christian. At that time this took the form of joining an established Christian Church. It was seven more years before the beginning of what I will call phase two of my spiritual journey began.

The Second Phase

Thomas - "My Lord, my God"

~~It~~ ^{was} the first phase ^{was} characterized ~~as~~ by C.S. Lewis as being "surprised by joy". The second phase would probably be equally appropriately characterized as being surprised by sorrow. Here, ^{in my life in Montreal} circumstances intervened in such a way that ~~the~~ ^{its} main structure and values ~~in my life~~ were shaken to their core. What I had believed was an ideal Christian life turned out to be a false image, or rather a very shallow and self serving one. This time I turned to the Gospel for guidance much as a storm weary ~~sailor~~ ^{sailor} looks towards the sky for some sign of light. Martin Luther King ^{had} said on the day of his assassination that it is only when the night is its darkest that the stars give the strongest light. I found this to be so. The living word seemed to be revealing itself in a much more profound way. When the disciples were in their boat on the violent sea they were very frightened. Christ came to them and said:

"It is I. Do not be afraid." 6:20

~~and~~ As the storm ceased and the sea became calm by Christ's presence ~~so~~ anxieties and confusions seemed to pass, but only for a moment. Then the questions, the doubts would begin to surface. Why am I suffering? Why did this happen to me? God must not be good. ~~And the~~ ^{22:11} tears of self pity would flow. One day I remember reading Christ's words to Magdeline who was in a state of acute distress outside the tomb. He asked:

"Woman, why are you weeping?" 20:13
I stopped in front of those words, ^{especially the unavoidable 'why'} and they seemed to stand still and demand an answer. Finally, I realized that I was weeping for myself. ~~and~~ ^{then} Christ began to teach me ^{me} me:

" I tell you , most solemnly,
unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies,
it remains only a single grain;
but if it dies,
it yields a rich harvest. " 12:24

The grain of self love must be buried in the ground;
~~and~~ the plant of self love must be pruned:

To Judas, ^{had} Christ said:

I am the true vine,
and my Father is the vinedresser.
Every branch in me that bears no fruit
he cuts away,
and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes
to make it bear even more.
You are pruned already,
by means of the word that I have spoken to you.

Make your home in me, as I make mine in you." 15:1-4

~~and~~ Like Judas I was wavering. It would be so simple to throw away the ~~main~~ link to Christ. It was so fragile, or at least it seemed. ~~And now it was only trouble.~~ ^{and attractive}
~~But then~~ There were ~~so~~ many other more reasonable philosophies ^{and chose some other way.} or ideologies. ^{I thought,} perhaps I should look around... ~~and~~ Then I read:

"You did not choose me,
No, I chose you;

to go out and to bear fruit,
fruit that will last; " 15:16

What kind of lasting fruit could this be, I wondered. My
rising interest in feminism ^{had} begun to question the possibility
of Christ as savior, and courses ^{I was teaching} on Nietzsche pointed to
the eventual death of God in western civilization. ~~And~~ when I read:

I tell you most solemnly,
before Abraham ever was,
I Am. 8: 58

And I remembered ^{Yahweh's} words to Moses:

"I am who I am." Exodus
and I believed those words in spite of myself. \Rightarrow This
belief was confirmed further: when Jesus said:

"I am the light of the world;
anyone who follows me will not be walking in the
dark;
he will have the light of life."

....~~He~~ continued

"It is true that I am testifying on my own behalf,
but my testimony is still valid,
because I know
where I come from and where I am going." 7 12-14

~~And~~ I had made a choice ~~and~~ Like Thomas who responded to
Christ's words: "Doubt no longer but believe," I ~~am~~ ^{would}
"My lord and my God." 20: 29-30

Then the slow revelation of the consequences of this decision
began to occur:

Christ said:

I tell you most solemnly,
when you were young
you put on your own belt
and walked where you liked;
but when you grown old
you will stretch out your hands,

and somebody else will put a belt around you,
and take you where you would rather not go." 21:18

To follow Christ means to go where one is called to go,
not where one plans to go. With this discovery I was able
to say that I would follow Christ even though I did not
know exactly where this would lead. The disciples had
asked Christ: "Rabbi...-where do you live/" And he had
answered them as he was answering me: "Come and see." 1: 39

The Third Phase Peter "You know where you"

If the first and second phases of the spiritual
journey can be characterized as being 'surprised by joy' and
'surprised by sorrow' respectively, then the third phase
can be understood as ~~being surprised by learning how to love~~ ^{being surprised by learning how to love}.
~~to love~~. This phase ~~lasts~~ ^{from} a lifetime and is a slow and
continuous revelation of Christ working ~~within~~ ^{from} ~~the self~~
through the Holy Spirit. The self is not lost but fulfilled.
Christ works like ~~yeast~~ ^{yeast} ~~leaven~~ within bread, like a seed within
the ~~ground~~, and is revealed little by little in daily acts
which transform our relationship to our neighbor. The
earlier call to follow ~~now~~ ^{becomes} someone outside ourselves
now ~~is~~ a constant reminder to allow that divine presence
to live within us. It even more is a constant revelation
of the same divine presence within our neighbor. This
neighbor is above all the sick, the suffering, the prisoner,
~~the~~ or as St Mother Theresa has put it: Christ in the
distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor. Our neighbor
however is equally revealed to us in the deceiving disguise
of the ordinary: our students, colleagues, fellow commuters,
business associates, ^{payesans}, etc. It is in the capacity to realize
Christ in the person sitting next to us, that is, that she or
he is created in the divine image that our capacity to love
begins to awaken. My own vocation as a feminist means that
I have a specific call to help women to realize this potential
within them as well as the potential to effect significant
social change within the broader society. ¹ My vocation as a
mother means that I have a specific call to help my two

* My vocation to be an anglophobe in Quebec means that I have a specific call to ~~participate~~ ^{participate} in the ~~prophetic~~ ^{prophetic} history of Quebec and especially its religious dimension. ⑤ **

sons to discover their capacities to love with the fullness of their being. ② My vocation as a teacher and writer of philosophy means that I have the specific call to help my students uncover through thought their capacities for full human development. ③ My vocation as volunteer at the palliative ^{Care} service means that I have a specific call to visit ~~and~~ the dying and to recognize their unique closeness to the suffering Christ. ④ * Each person through the working of the Holy Spirit within them and the guidance of friends within their specific community can discover a concrete realization of the words "Follow me." insert → over

In conclusion ~~that~~ I would like to end with more living words which specifically relate to this third phase of ~~the~~ ^{my} spiritual journey. After the resurrection Christ appeared several times to his disciples.

"The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord, and he said to them again,

Peace be with you.

As the Father sent me,
so I am sending you.

...

Receive the Holy Spirit." 20:21-3.

It is the Holy Spirit that will bring about the necessary transformation in the third phase of the spiritual journey, after the initial encounter with Christ and after the crucifixion of idols, or images which clouded this encounter because of their roots in previous life structures.

"Do not be surprised when I say:

You must be born from above.

The wind blows wherever it pleases;

you can hear its sound,

but you cannot tell where it comes from

or where it is going.

That is how it is with all who are born from

the Spirit." 3:8

** my recently discovered vocation to enter into ^{consecrated} relation with a Benedictine monastery as an oblate means that I have a specific call to ~~enter into~~ Christian community. ⑥

We do not know at the beginning exactly what this infusion of the Spirit will mean, ^{or} where it will lead. All we know is that it will be a slow and steady revelation of love.

"I give you a new commandment:
love one another;
just as I have loved you,
you must also love one another.
By this love you have for one another,
everyone will know that you are my disciples." 13:34-5

The theme of love is repeated over and over again during Christ's last discourse to **his** followers in the Gospel of John.

"If you love me you will keep my commandments." 14:15

~~and~~ We know the two commandments of equal force: the first is to love God with all our mind, heart, and strength; and the second is to love our neighbor as our self.

The living word then has the power to transform our lives. Far from this transformation becoming a restraint - it ~~has~~ the potential power of total liberation of all of creation.

Jesus said:

" If you make my word your home
you will indeed be my disciples,
you will learn the truth
and the truth shall make you free." 7:31-32

John the Baptist - Behold the Lamb of God
Thomas - my Lord & my God
Peter - You are the Christ
Before Christ
after resurrection
Christine Miller
before ascension